

Malý výbor ze starší české literatury

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The action of the story *Benito Cereno* is based on an incident from real life, over which Melville casts a veil of gloomy mystery. In the same way as in his better-known novel *Moby-Dick*, this story can also be interpreted as an allegory of the fight between good and evil. Professor Vančura shows, however, that the work can be adequately analysed only when we confront it with the reality of its own time. The conclusions which Melville reaches in his tale of the rebellious Negroes on the ship of the dying Spanish captain are in contradiction to objective reality. The apparently guiltless American captain, who saves the ship, is equally the representative of slavery with the Spanish aristocrat. The Negroes are cruel, but only because they have been cruelly and inhumanly treated by the white men. Professor Vančura reminds us, that only six years after the book appeared, the American Civil War broke out, and yet Melville's attitude to the sufferings of the Negro slaves is far from being so enlightened as that of Merimée. Without exception he condemns the slaves in revolt — for him they are the embodiment of evil, the black skin is the symbol of the black soul. For this reason the deeper meaning of the tale remains obscure. Although this book is an unforgettable depiction of the conflicts within man himself, it gives only a one-sided and hysterical view of the sufferings of humanity.

Joseph Conrad's short novel was written after slavery had been abolished. The tragedy of James Wait, the sick Negro seaman, who so profoundly affects the fate of the white man's ship, does not result from the colour of his skin but from his situation as a common sailor, serving before the mast for a wage. Conrad deals here with wider problems, those of the community of sailors and officers, and we may say, with problems which affect mankind in general. His method differs from the symbolism and mysticism of Melville. Although it is realistic, it is not identical with the "scientific", objectivistic method of Prosper Merimée. Professor Vančura considers that while Conrad is capable of giving a masterly presentation of the outer appearance of reality, he does not limit himself to this. The tale, which is apparently only the narrative of what took place during a long voyage, is constructed in such a way as to express the artist's recognition of truth. Conrad, though he saw the life of the sailor from the standpoint of the officer, nevertheless finds reason and excuse for the behaviour of the sailors and reveals a friendly attitude towards them. Where Melville saw a mystic symbol and Merimée the inevitability of mechanical causality, Conrad realised that even the changeless law of necessity conceals within itself a certain moral principle. This is the reason why his perception of the world is too wide to be limited purely to irony. Conrad too, while apparently merely narrating the lives and fates of his characters, seeks artistic means whereby he can express the whole context of their life in society. Though Conrad does consider the world to be unknowable, he does not seek to evade the attempt to know it. Therefore Professor Vančura holds Conrad to be the predecessor of later writers, who endeavoured not only to understand human society but also to change it.

By means of confronting these three tales, apparently so closely related yet differing so greatly in their method and scope, Professor Vančura has thrown light on the purpose of these writers, on the essential nature of their method, and on the significance of their work. His study reveals both works and authors in a new light and thus reveals new aspects of a whole period of development in West European and American literature of the nineteenth century. At the same time, the study demonstrates how Marxist literary theory, which does not isolate the writer's art from his opinions, can assess with precision the relationship between a work of art and society, and can accurately analyse its artistic qualities. The author of this study has convincingly shown that all these writers were gifted and honest artists, but that it was Conrad, with his broader conception of truth, his deeper comprehension of the aims of art and his protest against the world's injustice, who was the greatest artist of the three.

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Malý výbor ze starší české literatury vydal mnichovský profesor Alois Schmaus pod názvem *Altschechische Literatur* (Oto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1961, 80 stran). Výbor obsahuje ukázky ze staročeské poezie (z náboženské lyriky, legend, z Alexandreidy, Dalimila, z Mastičkáře, ze satiry Desatera kázanie božie a Satir o řemeslnících), ukázky ze Sváru vody s vínem a z Podkoního a žaka, bajku O lišče a čbánu a výňatky z Nové rady). Výbor přiblíží k posledním vydáním jednotlivých památek u nás a především k Výboru z české literatury po dobu Husovu.

Sympatická publikace v průřezu velmi dobře obeznámující s naší staročeskou poezií. Prof. A. Schmaus připravuje obdobný výbor ze staročeské prózy. z.